

# THE COMPANION.

No. III.—WEDNESDAY, JAN. 23, 1828

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“Something alone yet not alone, to be wished, and only to be found, in a friend.”—SIR W. TEMPLE.

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FRENCH PLAYS IN LONDON.—MOLIERE'S TARTUFFE.  
ANECDOTES OF THE AUTHOR. A SPECIMEN OF THE  
PIECE ITSELF, AND REMARKS ON THE PERFORMERS.

THERE is something very delightful in the friendliness of intercourse that has sprung up between France and England, since the late troubles. Cabinets may quarrel again, and wars be renewed; but the more intimacy there is in the meantime between the two nations, the less they will be disposed to be gulled into those royal amusements. Formerly, this kind of intercourse was confined to kings and courtiers; and whenever these gentlemen were disposed to pick a quarrel with one another, the people were set on to fight, like retainers to a couple of great houses; their employers all the while making no more of the business, than if they were playing a game of chess. Nations are growing wiser on this head; and nothing will serve better to secure their wisdom, than an interchange of their socialities, and an acquaintance with the great writers that have made them what they are.

It was with singular pleasure therefore that we found ourselves, the other night, sitting at a French play in the British metropolis, and that play Molière's. There, on the stage, was Molière, as it were himself; there spoke his very words, warm as when he first uttered them; there he triumphed over hypocrisy, and was wise and entertaining and immortal. But what in the meantime had become of Louis XIV and his splendour? What of all those lords and courtiers, who used to make a brilliant assemblage around him (we could not help fancying them in this very pit), and praising or withholding

their praise of the immortal man, as the king spoke or held his tongue? Gone is all that once filled that splendid "parterre," like the flowers of any other garden: gone all their plumes, and ribbons, and pulvilio, and their bowing gallantries, and the very love that here and there lurked among them, like a violet among the tulips: but there stood the spirit of Molière, as fresh as ever, and casting on their memory (when you thought of it) its only genuine lustre.

It is curious to think how this great writer had to win his way into toleration through the prejudices attached to a stage life; and how he depended upon men who were comparatively nothing, for an intimation to the rest of the world, that a great and original genius was really worth something. It is to the credit of Louis, that he managed his kingship in this matter in good taste, and allowed the genius of Molière to be pitted against the *marquises* and *grimaciers* of his court. If he had not stood by him, those butterflies the *petits-mâîtres*, and those blackbeetles the priests, had fairly stifled him. It was lucky that he wrote when the king was no older, and before he had become superstitious. It gives one a prodigious idea of the assumption of those times, and the low pitch at which an actor could be rated in spite of his being a great genius, that a shallow man of quality having found something ridiculous in Molière's mention of a "cream-tart" in one of his comedies, and not liking the raillery with which the author treated his criticism, contrived to lay hold of his head one day as the actor made him a bow, and crying out "*Tarte à la crème, Molière, tarte à la crème,*" rubbed his face against his cut-steel buttons, till it was covered with blood. For this brutality, it never entered any one's head that an actor could have a remedy, except in complaining to the king; which the poet did, and the peer was disgraced. Another anecdote, to the same purport, is more agreeably relieved. Molière, by way of being honoured, and set on a level with gentlemen, had been made one of his Majesty's valets-de-chambre. Presenting himself one day to make the royal bed, his helper abruptly retired, saying that he should not make it "with an actor." Bellocq, another valet-de-chambre, a man of a good deal of wit, and a maker of pretty verses, happening to come in at this juncture, said, "Perhaps M. de Molière will do me the honour of allowing *me* to make the king's bed with him." Molière was a man of great heart, very generous; but sensitive also, and subject in the midst of his pleasantries to that melancholy which is so often found in the company of wit. Any delicacy towards him must therefore have been extremely felt; though on the subject of scorn and arrogance, he doubtless had no

proportionate soreness at heart. His wisdom and genuine superiority must have saved him from that. It was on the side of his sympathies and not his antipathies, that Molière was weak. He troubled himself with a wife too young for him; and after having ridiculed jealousy in his comedies, was fain to acknowledge that he felt it in all its bitterness himself. Candour takes away the degrading part of these mortifications: but the sting is there nevertheless. What endears us the more to his sincerity, and to the habitual kindness of his heart, is his saying to his friend Chapelle, whom he made his father-confessor on this occasion, that "finding how impossible it was to conquer his jealousy, he began to think that it might be equally impossible in the object of his affections to get rid of her coquetry." The worst of it was, that their ages were unequal. His young wife (the daughter of an actress in his *corps dramatique*, which gave rise to a scandal refuted by the date of their connection) was herself an actress, beautiful, and surrounded with admirers. She probably loved the poet as well as she could, but found that she loved people of her own age better; while he, taking his undying admiration of beauty for a right to possess it, forgot till too late that poets' hearts remain young much longer than their persons. The consequence was, that two people, both of them perhaps very worthy, became a grief and torment to one another, merely because incompatible marriages are permitted; for Molière had been a great ridiculer of marriage, and there no doubt lay a good part of the sting. He should have gone abroad more out of the society of his *corps dramatique*, and found some charmer to love less unsuitable to his time of life. There are born poetesses, in their way, among the women, whom temperance and the graces help to keep young even in person, and often in a more touching manner than the young and thoughtless. Molière should have laid his laurelled head in the lap of one these. She might have repaid his candour and tenderness with a like generosity.

But we are forgetting the play.—The house (the Lyceum) opened for these performances last Wednesday. It has been newly fitted up for the purpose, with fresh mouldings or compartments round the boxes (we forget exactly what) and a drapery of scarlet and white, very handsome. The prices, to nearly the whole of the pit, remain the same as before, three and sixpence; but six shillings are paid for seats on a bench or two, and seven for those in a part of the orchestra. Some boxes may be taken by the evening, at two, three, and four guineas, according to the number of persons and the situation of the box. The rest are let for the season at prices which look enormous; being 80, 120, or 160, guineas for 40 nights.



The performances will be three times a-week, Monday, Wednesday, and Friday, till Lent. Money is not taken at the door. There is a list of the places where you can get them, at the bottom of the play-bill; such as the booksellers in Bond street; Marsh's, in Oxford street; Wilson's, at the Royal Exchange, &c. We bought ours at Mr Neele's, a door or two on the left of the main entrance to the theatre out of the Strand; which we mention, in order to shew, that people may go as usual, with no more trouble than if they paid at the door.

The performances of the evening were *Tartuffe*, followed by a coronation of the bust of Molière; *La Fille Mal Gardée*, a vaudeville in one act; and *L'Ambassadeur*, another, in which Perlet, who acted Tartuffe, and who is the principal performer of the company, reappeared in the chief character. We shall confine ourselves to the first piece, which indeed is the only one we saw, and which is quite sufficient to see and to think about for one time. Our observations upon it will not be directed to scholars only, and readers of French; but, agreeably to the plan pursued by us in a former publication, we shall endeavour to give all such readers as have a relish for what is good, a taste of it somehow or other, let them have missed scholarship, great or small, as they may. French is a very common acquirement; yet there are numbers unable to read even French, who very much deserve to do so, and who have a genuine perception of a good thing when it comes before them.

Few readers need be informed, but all will be glad to know, that the comedy of *Tartuffe* (from which our popular play of the *Hypocrite* is taken, which made the selection of it on this occasion every way judicious) may be ranked among the *avant couriers* of the knowledge and liberality of these times. It is a masterly satire upon religious hypocrisy; and on its first appearance at Paris, in an age full of well-fed devotees and gallant confessors, was received accordingly. The first three acts were brought out originally before the court at Versailles in the year 1664; but what may be called the first public representation of the entire piece, did not take place till 1667, when it was performed at Paris, and prohibited next day by an order from the First President of Parliament. Molière himself had to announce the prohibition, which he did in the following manner:—"Gentlemen, we reckoned this evening upon having the honour of presenting you with the Hypocrite; but Monsieur the First President does not wish us to play him." Our author must have reckoned very confidentially on the king's protection, to be able to joke in this manner.\* The time indeed

\* Another turn was given to this bon-mot in one of the provinces. The bishop, in a place where they were going to perform the comedy, had lately died. His successor was not equally disposed in favour of theatrical representations; and orders were given to the actors, that they should quit the town before he made his appearance, which he was to do the next day. Accordingly, when the time was come for giving out the performances of the next evening, the announcer, affecting not to know that his lordship was to arrive so soon, said "The Hypocrite, gentlemen, to-morrow."

was lucky for him so far. Louis was then young and gay, and equally victorious in war and gallantry. He had a minister the avowed patron of men of letters (Colbert), and a general who loved humour and original genius (Turenne).\* He did not think fit to let the piece re-appear for a year or two; but Molière remained on the best terms with him; and in 1669, *Tartuffe* rose again in spite of its enemies, and has remained ever since a stock acting piece,—the glory of the French stage, and the hatred of bigots and impostors. Perhaps they are more bitter against it in their hearts this very moment, than they have been for these hundred years; the Jesuits having trimmed their dark lanterns once more, and pieces of this kind offering the most insurmountable barriers against the re-action of priestcraft.†

It has been thought curious by some, that in the English Hypocrite the ridicule should be confined to sectarians, while in the original it attacks hypocrites of the establishment. This is to be accounted for on a variety of grounds. In the first place the Catholic establishment, especially as it existed in France at that time, did not make such an exclusive matter of difference of opinion, as the hierarchy in England; while on the other hand certain disputes in it were so fierce, and yet all parties pretended pretty nearly to such an equal measure of piety, that to make an heterodox person of the *Tartuffe* would have been absolutely to neutralize the satire on hypocrisy. It would have been a mere party libel. An English Methodist pretends to peculiar sanctity; but formalists of a similar description in France were hardly known till a later period. Again, a Catholic establishment is of a much more miscellaneous nature than a Protestant; admits a host of lay members; and otherwise affords pretences for quacks and hypocrites of all sorts. It is a much larger world; in which vice may be found in the particular, with less offence to the main body. Then again, there is confession, and the admission of interferers and regulators into the tenderest privacies of life. These people were very often at variance with the rest of the families whose heads they lorded it over (as Molière has taken care to shew); they were sometimes very officious in state matters and at court, where indeed the clerical power claimed a kind of sovereignty of its own, independent of that of the civil and executive, (a pretension, against which our anti-popery men are still warning us); and above all, at the time when Molière wrote, the king was not only young, and gay, and inclined to “cut,”

\* See in the works of La Fontaine a pleasant account of a chat that took place on the road between Turenne and that poet, when the former was on his way to one of his campaigns.

† The speech of Father Nitard to the Duke of Lerma may be taken as a specimen of the pitch of the insolence, worthy of *Tartuffe*, to which priests could be transported in those days. He was a Jesuit, and *confessor* to Louis's mother-in-law, the Queen of Spain. He told the Duke one day “that he ought to treat him with more respect; as he had every day his God in his hands (the Eucharist) and his Queen at his feet.”

his religious mortifiers, but the Great Condé, then in favour, was a sworn enemy of bigots; the Pope had not long since been bearded by the French authorities in Rome; Cardinals and Bishops were for the most part laymen at heart, and mixed not only with politics but with the pleasures of life; in short, "the cloth," as a matter of any solemnity, was at a disadvantage; and to pretend to an unusual measure of sanctity, was in some sort to offend priests as well as laymen. Molière himself tells us, that he had the approbation of the Legate; and that the greater part of the Bishops, to whom he had taken care to read his work, were "of the same way of thinking as his Majesty."\* Nevertheless, a tremendous cry was raised against it, even before it appeared. The author was called, he tells us, a libertine, a blasphemer, a devil incarnate; and no sooner was it brought out, than very worthy people, acted upon by the cries of bigotry, joined in the wish to have it suppressed. The President of Parliament, who agreed to become the instrument of the suppression, was the celebrated Lamoignon, the friend of Boileau, and reckoned one of the best men in the world. Boileau helped him perhaps afterwards to a better judgment. Menage tells us expressly, that he himself spoke to the President about it, and told him that the moral of the play was excellent, and calculated to be of public service.†

Menage, in the same passage of his book, ventures to prefer Molière's prose to his verses. That learned wit had no very great taste in verses at any time, and had been accustomed to a very bad taste in particular, which Molière rooted out. The classical scholar was judicious and generous enough at the time to acknowledge the reformation; but perhaps he never heartily forgot his old propensities. Perhaps also he grudged Molière that extraordinary facility in versifying, which Boileau has recorded with astonishment.‡

The happy power for which Boileau here praises his friend, is one of the most remarkable things in the *Tartuffe*. Those who know the Hypocrite of the English stage, know the other in a certain way; and know it well. But there is no comparison in the two styles; every word telling with double force in the Frenchman's mouth, and uniting with the familiarity of prose the terseness of wit in rhyme. Let the reader imagine the best colloquial verses of Dryden or Pope, full of wit and humour, uttering the finest knowledge of life, comprising a plot no less interesting than simple, agitating the feelings deeply before they have done, and dismissing the audience in the most generous disposition for truth; and they have a picture of this great and perfect comedy. An English

\* "Premier Placet, présenté au Roi, sur la comédie du *Tartuffe*."

† Menagiana, p. 43. Edit. 1694.

‡ Menage tells us, that when he himself sat down to write verses, he first "got together" his "rhymes;" and that his rhymes sometimes took him three or four months to "fill up!"—*Id.* p. 261.



audience, in their own language, could not relish a comedy in rhyme so well as the French can. Their manners are less conscious and mixed up. They could not so easily take an artificial grace for a natural one. But heard through the dimness of a language not habitual to us, we become just enough sensible of the grace and power of the versification, to admire the comedy the more, without being the less sensible of its truth and nature.

In venturing to lay a scene of it before the reader, we have therefore not ventured to do it in rhyme. It is indeed an injustice to the author, in one sense, not to do so (supposing we were able to do it); but it would be hurting the effect of his truth and humour, which are the greater matters. We have selected the scene more particularly, because it exhibits what we conceive to be the greatest and most original trait in the author's genius; to wit, his delight in putting a good, broad, sustained, and even farcical-looking joke, knowing it to be founded in exquisite truth, and resolving to relish it with us unalloyed, for that reason. It is the spirit and *gusto* of the truth, taking place of the formal image; and only making us hail and incorporate with it the more. The scene is between Orgon, the credulous master of the house who makes an idol of Tartuffe; and Dorina the servant, a great enemy of the impostor, and burning to see him detected. Tartuffe has not yet made his appearance, and this is the first time Orgon has made his. Let the reader admire the singular skill, with which in the midst of this "joke run down," the audience are let into the interior of the host's credulity, and of Tartuffe's power and worldliness. Orgon says but two things alternately throughout; and the performer must be imagined at once giving us a sense of this monotony of ideas, and varying the expression of them for the true comic effect. A little pause must be fancied occasionally, and a face full of meaning. The author of the Hypocrite has not ventured upon it;—but, imagine it in the hands of Munden! To complete the scene, Orgon's brother-in-law, another enemy of Tartuffe's, is present, wondering all the while at his infatuation. Orgon has just come from the country, and after interchanging civilities with his brother, begs him to excuse him a little, while he talks with the servant and asks after the welfare of his house. He addresses her accordingly:

"Well, Dorina, has everything been going on as it should do these two days? How do they all do? And what have they been about?"

*Dor.* My mistress was ill the day before yesterday with a fever. She had a headache quite dreadful to think of.

*Org. And Tartuffe?*

*Dor.* Tartuffe! Oh he is wonderfully well; fat and hearty, a fresh complexion, and a mouth as red as a rose.

*Org.* (turning about with an air of fondness) *Poor soul!*

*Dor.* In the evening my mistress was taken with a sickness, and could not touch a bit at supper, her head was so bad.

*Org. And Tartuffe?*

*Dor.* Oh, seeing she could not eat, he eat by himself; and very devoutly swallowed two partridges, with a good half of a hashed leg of mutton.

*Org. Poor soul!*

*Dor.* My mistress did not shut her eyes all night. The fever hindered her from getting a wink of sleep, and we were obliged to watch by her till morning.

*Org. And Tartuffe?*

*Dor.* Tartuffe, happy gentleman, with a comfortable yawn, goes me right from table to bed, where he plunges into his warm nest, and sleeps soundly till morning.

*Org. Poor soul!*

*Dor.* At last we prevailed upon Madame to be blooded, and she had great relief from it.

*Org. And Tartuffe?*

*Dor.* Monsieur Tartuffe was very much relieved also. He found himself charming; and to repair the loss of the blood which Madame had sustained, took four draughts of wine with his breakfast.

*Org. Poor soul!*

*Dor.* In short both are very well now; so I'll go and tell my mistress you are coming, and how happy you are to hear she is recovered."

We have left ourselves very little room to speak of the actors. In fact we must see them again, before we can venture to speak much; and then we shall feel diffident, except in speaking of what all the world may judge of. French nature is in some respects so different from ours,—we mean, that the same nature, where great passions are not concerned, exhibits itself in such various ways through the medium of national manners,—that all critics ought to be cautious how they pronounce upon it, especially those who know more of the language in books than as it is spoken; which we confess to be our case. We shall therefore wait, and judge cautiously. Meantime we cannot help saying, that M. Perlet appears to us a performer of the very first merit, full both of sensibility and judgment, relishing, self-possessed, various,—“up,” as the phrase is, to every situation, and every part of it; and with an equal perception of the gravest as well as the lightest things he has to say. There was an air of singular depth and intention throughout his performance; and when he turned with that preternatural insolence of heart, after his detection, and pausing before he spoke, with his arm up, and an air of frightful preparation, told the master of the house “to go out of the house himself, for it was his,”—there was something ghastly and awful in it. The house was so still, we felt as if we could almost have heard the rain out of doors. Yet the same man, we are told, is wonderful in clowns and idiots, and is but a young actor. We must not forget Madame Daudel, a sort of younger Mrs Davison; very pleasant. She acted Dorine.

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#### TO CORRESPONDENTS.

There is real poetry in the work by an unknown author entitled *The Poet's Pilgrimage*; and we hope soon to have an opportunity of shewing it. *Medium*, G.—T. M. B.—W.—S. T. P. *A Well-Wisher* (very kind and welcome), and our cautious friend who signs himself “*Your obedt. humble servant, as it may prove,*”—are received, and will be separately noticed next week.

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